

Fort Simpson

NORTHWEST
TERRITORIES



POLAR
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FORMATION

POLARPAM

FORT SIMPSON

Fort Simpson is located 61° 52' North Longitude, 121° 23' West Latitude, or about 900 miles northwest of Edmonton, Alberta. The settlement is situated on a small island at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers. The Mackenzie River is about one mile wide at this point. The island is separated from the south bank of the Mackenzie River by a narrow, shallow channel which functions only at spring break-up when water levels are high. This channel is called "The Snye" locally. From the island a road leads over a causeway to the West bank of the Liard River, where an airport is situated.

The island commands a view of the Mackenzie River and Gros. Cap, a 225' high promontory which marks the meeting place of the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers. The community is surrounded by forest of pine, spruce, birch, poplar, and aspen, with dense bush undergrowth. In the summer months many wild flowers and berries make their appearance.

The island is subject to flooding. The spring of 1963 brought a record flood which necessitated evacuation of most of the Indian population from low-lying ground. Most of the Indians relocated in a planned section, which is well serviced with roads and electricity.

Fort Simpson's climate is continental, with long, cold winters, and short, fairly warm summers. The average summer daytime temperature is about 65°F. with peaks in the nineties. The average winter daytime temperature is -10°F. with extremes to fifty degrees below zero. Annual precipitation is quite low, averaging about twelve inches.

Until recent years, Fort Simpson had been only a fur trading centre. More recently it became the government administration centre for settlements in the immediate area. The settlement is now run by a fully elected eight member Hamlet Council, and employs a full-time Secretary Manager. The prospective Mackenzie highway and pipeline are in the process of changing Fort Simpson out of all recognition. It is likely to become a major growth centre, partly because of the highway and pipeline, but also because Fort Simpson is in a strategic location as the terminus of the projected road from Fort Nelson, B.C. and a possible future terminus of the B.C. Railway, which has reached Fort Nelson and has political push to continue north. As a result of this future promise, Fort Simpson is beginning a boom period. The settlement is struggling to keep up with the demand on its facilities and the cries to extend services and develop more land for commerce.

cial and residential use. It is obvious that the settlement will have to extend onto the mainland, as the useable land on the island is rapidly running out. At present the Hamlet Council is trying to work out the social, economic, and physical implications of a move or extension to the mainland.

HISTORY

The Indians in the Fort Simpson region are mainly Slave or Slavey Indians. In the early eighteenth century, Slave territory was around Athabasca Lake, Slave River, and the western side of Great Slave Lake. However, Cree invaders from the East forced the Slave Indians down the Mackenzie River. A new Slave territory took shape, including both banks of the Mackenzie River from Great Slave Lake up to Fort Norman.

Slave Indian culture was oriented to the forest environment. The main resources were caribou and moose, with fish also playing an important part in the diet. In summer the Slave lived in conical brush or spruce bark lodges, and in winter they occupied oblong cabins made of poles and moss with a roof of spruce boughs. The Slave tribe was formed of small, independent, nomadic bands. There was no strong political organization within the tribe. To the South of Fort Simpson are found the Nahanni Indians, a band of mountain Slave. Downriver, to the northwest are found members of the Hare Tribe.

Fort Simpson has the distinction of being the oldest continuously occupied trading post on the Mackenzie River. The settlement was built around 1804 by the Northwest Company, and was called "Fort of the Forks". It was originally established to exploit the abundance of prime beaver and marten in the area and because of its potential for mixed farming.

The Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company amalgamated in 1821, and in 1822 "Fort of the Forks" was renamed in honour of Sir George Simpson, the first Governor of the combined trading companies. Fort Simpson became headquarters for the Mackenzie District operations of the Hudson's Bay Company. From 1828 to 1888 York boats hauled freight and passengers into Fort Simpson, and many traders and boat captains would winter there.

The St. David Anglican Mission was established in Fort Simpson in 1858, and the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Mission came in 1894. Bishop Bompas (Anglican) and Father Petitot (R.C.) are

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both renowned for their early Northern travel and exploration. In 1874, after nine years of service in the north, Rev. Bompas was named Bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Athabasca, which had its headquarters at Fort Simpson. He continued his work with the Indians, and was transferred to the Yukon in 1891. Father Petitot has left many excellent accounts of historical events and aboriginal cultures of the region.

In 1888, the York boats went out of use, and the Hudson's Bay Company steamer "Wrigley" came into service on the Mackenzie River. Many York boat brigade men settled at Fort Simpson as trappers or Hudson Bay Company employees. The new steamer created a great demand for logs which could not be met on the small Fort Simpson island, but the settlement became a great fur-trading centre, dealing mainly in beaver and marten. Until recent decades prices went up as high as \$80.00 per beaver pelt and \$100.00 for dark marten. A trapper might bring in \$100,000 worth of fur in his lifetime.

The first quarter of the twentieth century brought many additions to the Fort Simpson community. In 1910 the first Indian agency was opened by Reverend Gerald Card. Later the agency was taken over by Flynn Harris, who also became Fort Simpson's first official Postmaster in 1917. In 1912 the R.C.M.P. established a detachment post at Fort Simpson. In 1916 St. Margaret's Hospital was built. In 1917, the first Roman Catholic school was opened (the Anglican mission has been operating a school since 1888). A small government school was added several decades later, in 1949.

Fort Simpson has its famous names. Dr. Charles Camsell geologist, spent his childhood in Fort Simpson, where his father was Hudson's Bay Company factor in charge of all the company posts along the river. Descendants of many of the old Hudson's Bay Company retainers of a century ago are still resident in Fort Simpson. Names such as Camsell, Hardisty, Lafferty, Sibbeston, McPherson, Villeneuve, Guadet, and Hope are still quite common in the area, and Fort Simpson continues to add to her role of intriguing characters.

Perhaps the most "famous" resident of Fort Simpson today is Albert Faille, a retired trapper. Born in Pennsylvania and raised by foster parents, Faille ran away from home at an early age. He spent most of his life alone, so did not mind the isolation of a trapper's life. He began exploiting the North's natural fur resources in 1924. After a life-

time of trapping at the spry age of 63 years old, Faille began his search for the legendary gold in Nahanni country. Faille's annual one-man expeditions into the Nahanni River Valley brought fame and the cameras and curiosity of the National Film Board. Faille's solitary quests are now the subject of a NFB documentary entitled "Nahanni". The Legend of Headless Valley was born in 1908, when the skeletons of two prospectors, Frank and Wille McLeod, were found. The two men had gone off in search of the mysterious gold, and a note found near their skeletons indicated that they had been successful in their prospecting. However, the gold, as well as the skulls of the two prospectors, could not be found anywhere. Since that time reports of mysterious deaths and disappearances have continued.

In the twentieth century Fort Simpson's capacity for growing vegetables and raising livestock earned it the title of "Garden of the Mackenzie". The missions carried on mixed farming very successfully, supplying fresh vegetables, milk, beef, pork, chickens and eggs to the community for almost half a century. However, when the winter road came through from Fort Providence, it became more practical to import produce than to raise it locally and pay the high costs of local labour. In 1947 the Canada Department of Agriculture began a Dominion Experimental Station, developing varieties of cereal crops, vegetables and flowers which could thrive best in the Northern environment. This project was brought to a close in 1970.

A modern public school, the Thomas Simpson school, was opened officially, connecting Fort Simpson to the rest of the system, and bringing the "outside" much closer to Fort Simpson residents. Now roads to Fort Nelson and to Inuvik are under construction, and Fort Simpson is becoming a major centre for transportation and northern exploration activities.

ECONOMY

Once purely a trading post, with fur as an economic base, Fort Simpson has shifted in recent years to become an area administrative centre. An Area Service Officer of the N.W.T. government is situated in Fort Simpson and is responsible for outlying settlements such as Wrigley, Fort Liard, Nahanni Butte, Jean-Marie River, and Trout Lake.

Logging operations have played a minor part in Fort Simpson's economy for over fifty years. The first sawmill (steam-operated) in the settlement was

operated by the Indian Agency. Since then, logging has become private enterprise.

In addition to excellent renewable fur resources, Fort Simpson has its enviable record as a Northern garden settlement. The soil is excellent--silty loam which is free of stones. Summer frost damage is very rare. Fish resources in the region include Grayling, Lake Trout, Whitefish, and Great Northern Pike. Ducks, Ptarmigan, Grouse, and geese can be taken in season. Moose, caribou, mountain sheep, and bears are all within reach of the settlement.

At present there are about 120 persons continuously employed by local businesses in Fort Simpson. Recent mineral and oil exploration has helped to make Fort Simpson one of the major growth centres of the Northwest Territories. A great deal of construction will take place in the near future, with new roads and pipelines under construction, and the settlement site. These changes have already begun.

TRANSPORTATION

In 1970 Highway #1, the Mackenzie Highway was extended to Fort Simpson, providing all weather road access year round, except for two brief interruptions during freeze-up and break-up. A ferry service provides crossing on the Liard River in summer, and an ice bridge is maintained in winter months.

Fort Simpson has two airports, both licensed by the Ministry of Transport. The main airport, with a 6,000' runway and a new terminal building, is situated some nine miles southeast of the town on the mainland. Small aircraft of the charter companies based at Fort Simpson use the shorter - 3,000' airstrip on the island, which is capable of handling a DC3. Pacific Western Airlines has scheduled flights twice weekly from Edmonton to Fort Simpson. Arctic Air Ltd. runs scheduled flights twice weekly to Fort Nelson. In addition, Arctic Air has twelve planes based at Fort Simpson for charter service.

Fort Simpson has a wharf and various types of loading equipment. During the shipping season, July to September, barges arrive from Hay River. Freight is also continuously brought into the settlement by truck. A taxi service operates within the settlement, and meets all scheduled P.W.A. flights to provide limousine service from the main airport.

COMMUNICATIONS

Canadian National Telecommunications maintains a telephone system in Fort Simpson, and R.C.M.P. operates a radio for communications. CBC provides a local community radio station, CFMR, which is operated on a volunteer basis.

The settlement publishes a weekly local paper, the Mackenzie News.

MUNICIPAL SERVICES

Residents of Fort Simpson have water piped to their homes. Sewage and waste water are piped away. Garbage is collected twice weekly. Electricity is provided by N.C.P.C., whose six diesel units have a 2,225 kw capacity. Fuel storage tanks at Fort Simpson have a bulk capacity of 1,300,000 gallons.

HEALTH SERVICES

A resident doctor employed by the Northern Health Services acts as a medical officer of health. Daily clinics are held, public health programs are instituted and carried out. Also employed are a Public Health Nurse and a Community Health Worker. The Doctor and Public Health Nurse provide medical and health services to the outlying areas as well as Fort Simpson. St. Margaret's Hospital was built in 1916. The original building burnt down in June, 1930, and a new building opened in 1931. The hospital is run by the Grey Nuns of Montreal and lay assistants. St. Margaret's will be replaced in 1973 by a new hospital. The new building will open in April with twelve beds, but the core is designed to have a thirty bed capacity.

EDUCATION

The modern and steadily growing Thomas Simpson School teaches students up to grade nine. In addition to this public school the community has one government run hostel for students from outlying settlements. Formerly there were two hostels, one run by the Anglican Church and one run by the Catholic Church. However, as a result of local pressures, schools have been expanded at the settlement level, so that now more and more children can receive an education in their home settlement, and the need for centralized hostels is declining. After grade nine, Fort Simpson students are sent to Yellowknife or Fort Smith to continue their education.

STORES

Hudson's Bay - General Store; fur trader;
Turner's Store - General Store; fur trader;
Godwin's Store - Groceries;
Igloo Building Supplies - Hardware;
Arts & Crafts Centre - Good quality and variety
of handicrafts;
Liquor Store - Beer and Liquor
Jeanette's Boutique
Also two service stations.

CHURCHES

St. David's Anglican Mission and the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Mission have served Fort Simpson for over a century. A Pentecostal Mission was established more recently.

RECREATION

Fort Simpson's recreation facilities include a community hall with a capacity of 200 persons, a two sheet curling rink, an arena for skating and hockey, a swimming pool (summer only), a ball diamond, tennis courts, a track, a Youth Centre, and playground. The Igloo Theatre, with a capacity of 300 persons, opened in 1962. Weekly dances in Fort Simpson are planned by the Community Club, which also organizes an annual Fall Fair, with displays of produce, handicrafts, artwork, plants, and baked goods. Fort Simpson's Centennial Park is a good place to relax or have a picnic.

ODDS AND ENDS

Fort Simpson is proud to own a library--the John Gilbey Memorial Library--run by N.W.T. Public Library Services.

There is a branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce serving Fort Simpson.

Mail is delivered four times weekly. The Post Office is located in the Federal Building. Fort Simpson's postal code is XOE ONO.

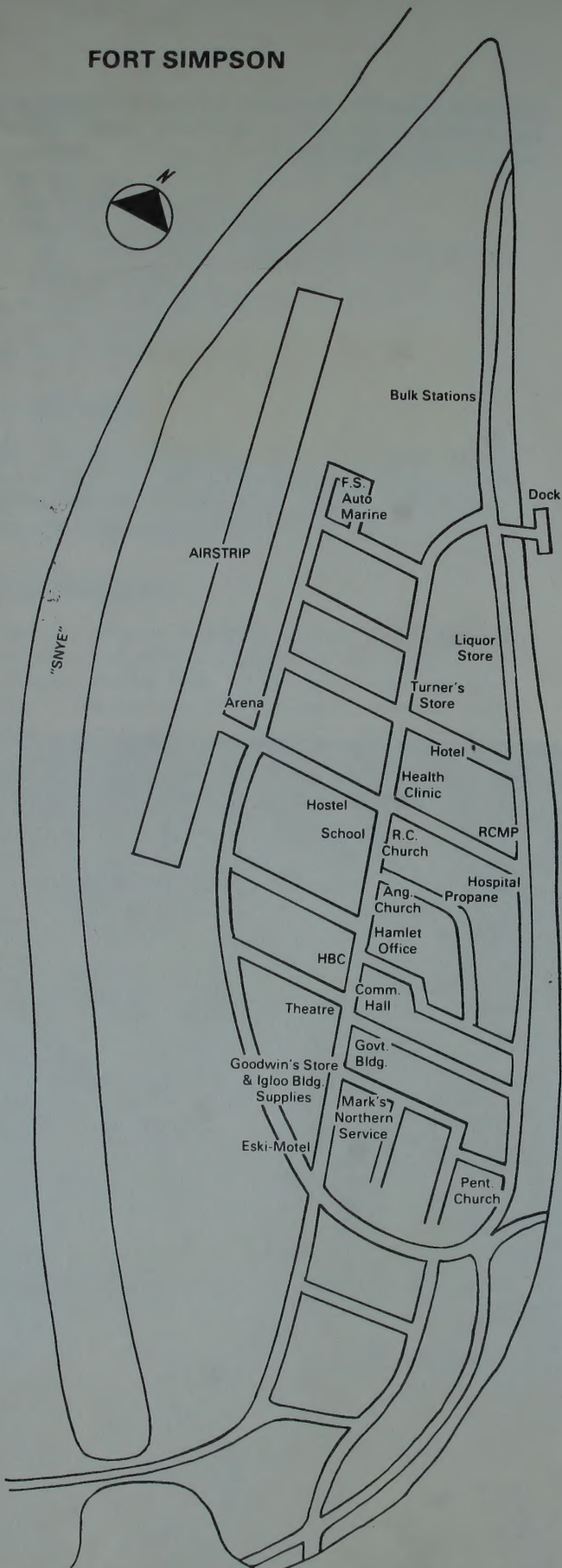
Fort Simpson's population for 1972 was about 1,200.

Spectacular Virginia Falls on the South Nahanni River is a sight well worth seeing. The waterfall shows a vertical face of four acres of water, and is twice the height of Niagara Falls. The South Nahanni plunges over 300 feet at that spot. For trans-

portation from Fort Simpson contact Arctic Air, or try to make a deal with a local boat owner. Arctic Air's number is 695-2211.



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NORTHWEST TERRITORIES GENERAL INFORMATION

1,304,903 square miles, being 33.9 percent of the area of Canada.

Mainland area	730,266 square miles
Freshwater area	51,465 square miles
Offshore Islands area	523,172 square miles

Coastline length — approximately 9,500 miles.

Highway system — 841 miles.

Population — 1971 - 35,526: 1966 - 28,128

Business Volume 1970 — approximately \$215,000,000

Value of mineral production included above — \$124,000,000

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Department
of Information
GOVERNMENT OF THE N.W.T.

